

The Road To HOLLYWOOD

By Pam Droog

The scene for the reality-based television show was one of tragic devastation. A burned and overturned van, shattered glass, broken trunks and musical instruments were strewn across the asphalt. Worst of all, among the wreckage lay a hurt and bleeding woman surrounded by emergency medical personnel.

But to certain observers on the set, the real focus was the road – specifically, a section of southbound Route 291 southeast of Kansas City, Mo. This past summer, the Missouri Department of Transportation allowed a California production company access to the uncompleted, unopened highway to shoot a segment of “Only A Miracle” for Discovery Health TV. It’s one of the more recent examples of how MoDOT helps reinforce

Missouri’s reputation as a great state for making TV shows, movies, commercials and videos.

“We are well aware that production involving highways raises convenience and safety issues, but MoDOT understands the economic importance of finding practical solutions,” says Jerry J. Jones, executive director of the Missouri Film Commission, a division of the Missouri Department of Economic Development. “Without MoDOT, ‘Only A Miracle’ would not have been made in Missouri and our economy would be several thousand dollars poorer for it.”



Kansas City Skyline

Middle: That overturned van is a made-to-order prop. Bottom: Actors and crew prepare for the next scene. Bottom right: Pam Morgan is all smiles despite being covered in fake blood.



Competitive Edge

Missouri competes with every state and many countries to bring in movie and TV production, Jones says. When state agencies like MoDOT and DED are willing to help and work together, it can make a huge competitive difference. “Only A Miracle” director Ron Zimmerman agrees.

“It was our great luck through MoDOT to have a stretch of road that was under construction but actually looked completed,” says Zimmerman, whose credits include “Unsolved Mysteries” and “America’s Most Wanted” episodes.

The show, which will air in late fall, re-enacts the June 2000 accident involving gospel performers Pam and Phil Morgan of Lee’s Summit, Mo., who were on their way home from a concert when the one-car crash occurred. Thrown from the vehicle and paralyzed from the chest down, Pam was destined for life as a quadriplegic. Today – miraculously – she walks, performs and lives a normal life. In fact, she plays herself in the show: she was the injured woman lying on the highway, covered in fake blood.

How It Works

There’s no official process for using a MoDOT roadway in a production, says Norman Beeman, senior traffic specialist and permit supervisor in MoDOT’s Kansas City district office.

Typically, he’ll receive a call from the Kansas City Film Office or Missouri Film Commission seeking a particular type of road or bridge, plus permission to shoot on it. That could involve closing the thoroughfare to traffic intermittently or up to several hours.

“If the request involves an interstate, I’ll check with the appropriate authorities,” Beeman says. “Otherwise, I handle it here myself and issue a permit, or not. Generally the requests are very reasonable.”

Beeman adds he enjoys working with production people. “They are well organized and know their stuff. They understand I’m going to stay focused on traffic and safety.”



PHOTO AT TOP BY CATHY MORRISON. ALL OTHER PHOTOS BY STEVE PORTER



U2 In KC

Traffic and safety got a lot of attention one day in May 1997 when the rock band U2 shot its “Last Night On Earth” video in Kansas City.

Beeman recalls, “We did this in response to a personal request from the mayor of Kansas City who thought a famous rock group using the Kansas City skyline as a backdrop sounded good. The whole thing came together in just a few days.”

Early in the morning of the shoot, MoDOT closed the south side of the Interstate 670 downtown loop and routed traffic over the loop’s north side.

“We got out our radios, set out message boards and barricades, and advised traffic control people and the police,” Beeman says. “Everything was going along fine until two semis collided on the north loop. That just locked everything up. But if we hadn’t had that wreck,” he says, “nobody would have noticed!”

Director Rick Cowan of High Prophet Productions in Kansas City recalls that although traffic was tied up for a long time, the shoot itself only took a couple of hours. “The point was to look as if the city was deserted, so we couldn’t see the cars on the ramps on the west side of downtown. We were surrounded by traffic but couldn’t see any. I remember standing in the middle of I-670 thinking, ‘This is an amazing thing.’”

Recently Cowan worked with MoDOT to stop traffic in brief intervals on a Route 45 bridge near Farley, Mo., for a Pioneer Seed commercial.

“We shut it down in two-minute stretches about 20 times so we could send four 18-wheelers across,” he says. “We’d get our vehicles in position, work with officers to close down traffic, then move our trucks out, run ‘em across, shoot ‘em and open up again. There was never a large backup.”

Nor was safety ever an issue, Cowan says. “MoDOT’s very protective of motorists, which they should be.”

Can’t Do It Without The DOT

Beeman says working with film and TV producers “adds some spice to the daily humdrum of concrete pavement. Dealing with people in completely different fields is exciting.”

Above all, he notes, “although MoDOT is a bureaucracy, I like when I can show we are flexible and can help simplify things for people. They really appreciate it.”

And they talk about it, Jones says. “All these producers network. They know where it’s easy or hard to shoot, so if they’ve had a good experience with Missouri or MoDOT they’ll pass it along and that brings in more production.”

Through the years Missouri has had its share. Gary Gonder, director of communications for the Missouri Lottery and executive director of the Missouri Film Commission from 1984 to 1992, recalls working with MoDOT on several movies and commercials.

“In 1984 a European production company filmed a Southern Comfort whiskey commercial in St. Charles, and they needed an overhead shot of a riverboat coming up the Missouri River. MoDOT let us close one lane on the old St. Charles bridge which was a major traffic artery then,” he says. “That same bridge was used years earlier for ‘Escape From New York’ and the production company filled it with burned up cars, wreckage and bodies. The shoot was late at night.”

In a scene in the 1985 film “Planes, Trains and Automobiles,” actor Steve Martin slides down an embankment next to Interstate 70 at Lambert St. Louis International Airport.

“He had to slip down this snow-covered hill but it was during a classic St. Louis January thaw when the weather was 70 degrees,” Gonder says. “MoDOT gave us permission to cover the area with ice chips!”



Over the years MoDOT also has allowed movie companies to install train tracks through unused trestles, detour traffic around a town’s only major thoroughfare, even cover streets with dirt for a period look. That happened in Arrow Rock for “Tom Sawyer” and in St. Charles for “Return To Hannibal.”

“It’s very important when you’re making a movie or commercial to have the transportation department on your side because you can’t do anything without them,” Gonder says. “They want people to be safe, too, so they make sure things are done right.” ■

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